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“Like Dying and Like Being Born”: The Portal, the Door, and the Closet in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Dr. Jeff Karem, department chair and professor of English at Cleveland State University, for his valuable feedback and support throughout my research and writing process.

In his 2017 novel *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid explores a global narrative of migrant and refugee experience. The plot defies reader expectations by introducing elements of magical realism in the form of the “doors,” unassuming portals which allow characters to step through and emerge on the other side of the world. With this blurring of borders, Hamid confronts racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and colonialism. Many critics have addressed these themes, as well as the nuanced portrayal of Muslim identity in the diverging experiences of the two main characters. But one aspect of the novel that the academic community has not focused on thus far is LGBTQ+ identity, including Nadia’s as she realizes her attraction to women. In addition to its significance for other marginalized groups, the portal plot involves potent symbolism for LGBTQ+ experience. By using the imagery of doors in *Exit West*, Hamid reflects and articulates the LGBTQ+ characters’ journeys of coming out in parallel with their experiences of migration.

Hamid’s work has incorporated imagery and characters from the LGBTQ+ community before, though mostly in subtext as Jina Moon explores in a 2019 analysis of his earlier novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Hamid approaches diverse experiences of sexuality more directly in *Exit West*. During her character arc in the novel, Nadia has significant sexual relationships with men and women. The central relationship of the story is the one between Nadia and Saeed, which quietly falls apart by the end of novel. But Nadia also reflects on the first man she had sex with, and ends the novel in a relationship with a woman she meets in America. This does not supersede Nadia’s attraction to men, however, as she continues to fantasize about “a beautiful man she passed as she walked down to work . . . the musician who had been her first lover . . . [and] the girl from Mykonos” (Hamid 200). With this in mind, it would not be in good faith to describe Nadia as a gay woman or lesbian simply because she has a female partner. Nadia does not identify her sexuality with specific labels, but since she is attracted to more than one gender, we can fairly describe her as bisexual. Furthermore, in a vignette from Chapter Nine, Hamid focuses on a love story between an elderly man and a wrinkled man. What these characters have in common is that they all meet their partners because of the doors.

The couple in Chapter Nine meets when the wrinkled man takes a door from Rio de Janeiro and arrives outside the elderly man’s flat in Amsterdam. In a little over three pages, which span about a week and a half in their lives, the men develop a romantic relationship. The passage closes on the image (a photograph) of their first kiss. As Liliana M. Naydan concludes, this kiss “challeng[es] ageist and heterosexist notions of their love being less valid than that of young, heterosexual partners” (446). Furthermore, this meaningful challenge is made possible because of the doors in the universe of *Exit West*. The vignette begins with a sketch of the elderly man’s loneliness, as he ponders on “two chairs, two chairs from ages ago

when there were two people living in his flat, though now there was one, his last lover having left him bitterly” (Hamid 174). The image of an elderly man sitting alone, next to a chair left empty, is a compellingly sad one even before the readers learn the reason.

The first time the elderly man sees the wrinkled man, he sits on his balcony and watches the wrinkled man “emerging from the common shed in the courtyard” (Hamid 174). When the wrinkled man silently greets him, before returning through the doors (back to Rio, the elderly man will later learn), the elderly man is “taken aback” and “transfixed” (175). Most clearly from a narrative perspective, this is the surprise of new attraction. But this scene of one man watching at a distance, stunned and intrigued, while another man *emerges* freely from a door, also functions as a powerful symbol for the ways that closeted individuals regard and follow those who are already out.

Hamid strengthens this parallel during a later meeting, when “the wrinkled man invite[s] the elderly man to come with him through the black door” (175). To be *invited* to go through the door reflects the way closeted people are encouraged and emboldened in their identity when they find community and companionship. Then the elderly man is “helped to his feet” by the wrinkled man in another show of community and solidarity (176). The wrinkled man shows the elderly man his studio of paintings, an act which carries trust and vulnerability. Their relationship develops from there, and the next week they share their first kiss, taken in the camera lens of “a war photographer” (176). In a compelling twist, Hamid places a photographer who has made a career with images of violence and devastation as the person who (accidentally) documents an expression of love. This image and its context serves as an extension of the arguments for pacifism and unity which Hamid expounds upon in the novel. The doors can represent emerging from the closet and finding happiness, and they also made the kiss possible literally by connecting the homes of the two men. As Naydan observes, their relationship “thrives across national divides” and “transcend[s] the language barrier” (446). So, Hamid’s doors operate at the intersection of multiple identities, including nationality and sexuality.

In *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe*, geographer Michael P. Brown writes that “the closet is a spatial metaphor,” which “alludes to certain kinds of location, space, distance, accessibility, and interaction” (1). But it is a metaphor whose intent has been largely accepted, to a point where few people question its origins and meaning—a “dead metaphor,” as Brown summarizes (6). At the time of Brown’s writing in 1990, the closet and its related phrases (“out” or “closeted”) were already shorthand; in the thirty years since, it has only become more familiar in the public consciousness. That is not to say that the closet metaphor has become obsolete. In her *Epistemology of the Closet*, a foundational text in queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick characterizes the closet

as “the fundamental feature of social life” for LGBTQ+ people: “there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence” (68).

The closet is certainly still there, and cynics argue that it may always be there. But in daily life, we may not often realize the spatial presence for which Brown argues. As a queer and bisexual person, navigating life “in” and “out” as Sedgwick writes we all do, I know that I have not often considered the closet as space. Brown insists that “the closet is not always just a rhetorical flourish . . . it is a manifestation of heteronormative and homophobic powers in time—space, and moreover . . . this materiality mediates a power/knowledge of oppression” (3). This is where the magical realism of *Exit West* becomes a potent illustration, with images and symbolism beyond mere rhetoric. Every door through which Nadia travels and every space which she occupies, marks her journey of identity as a bisexual woman.

Nadia and Saeed leave their country first through a door to Mykonos and as they step through, Nadia experiences the “passage” as a feeling “both like dying and like being born” (Hamid 104). This metaphor of rebirth, or end and beginning, can easily describe both migration and coming out. While in Mykonos, Nadia meets a “partly shaved-haired local girl who was not a doctor or a nurse but just a volunteer,” who bandages an open wound on her arm (Hamid 117). Asymmetrically shaved haircuts are often associated with alternative subcultures of youth, and some readers in the LGBTQ+ community will immediately recognize this woman’s hairstyle as a likely marker of gay identity or queerness. In a similar vein, Brown examines the coming-out story of a gay man whose performance of changing his clothes and hair made any speech act declaring “I’m gay” unnecessary (44). With this quick visual detail, Hamid has already sent a signal to some readers. For readers who miss this coding, or who choose not to make assumptions based on fashion, the chemistry between Nadia and the girl from Mykonos is less subtle as the girl treats her wound “gently, holding Nadia’s arm as though it was something precious, holding it almost shyly” (Hamid 117). If there was any doubt—the girl was described as “kind” after all, so perhaps she treats every patient like this—Hamid spells it out: “there was a connection between them” (117). For the rest of her stay in Mykonos, Nadia visits the girl every day.

This is an essential time in Nadia’s life, but it only lasts for two pages until the girl finds a door that will take Nadia and Saeed away from Mykonos. The women share one last moment of intimacy:

The girl wished them good luck, and she hugged Nadia tight, and Saeed was surprised to see what appeared to be tears in the girl’s eyes, or if not tears then at least a misty shine, and Nadia hugged her too, and this hug lasted a

long time, and the girl whispered something to her, whispered, and then she and Saeed turned and stepped through the door and left Mykonos behind. (Hamid 118)

We do not know what the girl from Mykonos says to Nadia, and Nadia will never know what her life would have been had she stayed in Mykonos with her. This sentence, and Nadia's entire relationship with her, have a sense of ending too soon. Hamid was not in a hurry, nor did he run out of words to describe the moment. Rather, his style here reflects that this is the first time Nadia has experienced attraction to a woman, and that such a realization feels like a whirlwind which is impossible to process as it happens. Indeed, Nadia may not even fully realize it until after she leaves Mykonos.

The door takes Nadia and Saeed to London next. There, she has "a dream, a dream of the girl from Mykonos, and she dreamt that she had . . . passed back through the door to the Greek isle" (Hamid 171). Naydan analyzes this moment as part of Nadia's "sense of sexual liberation" (446). Nadia wakes up from the dream "almost panting, and felt her body alive, or alarmed, regardless change, for the dream had seemed so real, and after that she found herself thinking of Mykonos from time to time" (Hamid 171). The exhilaration, fear, and surprise here reflect the emotions that come from realizing one's identity, complicated by lingering notions of internalized homo/biphobia. It is only after she leaves Mykonos that Nadia takes the time to reflect on her feelings and what they might mean.

Also notably in the London passages, Hamid again evokes the iconography and aesthetics of queerness in his description of one of Nadia and Saeed's housemates: "a fast-talking Nigerian woman [Nadia's] age, a woman with a leather jacket . . . who stood like a gunslinger, with hips open and belt loose and hands at her side, and spared no one from her verbal lashings" (149). An encounter with her in a hallway makes Saeed feel uncomfortable, even "emasculated," which may lead us to critically examine Saeed's relationship with his gender and national identity (151). But it is also not difficult to read the woman in the leather jacket as gay: from the emphasis on her body language as assertively taking up space, to the jacket itself which many lesbians and bisexual women cite as a hallmark of fashion in queer women's subcultures. The woman in the leather jacket signals that she is secure in herself and her identity, to the point where the people around her perceive her confidence as a threat. As Nadia begins to recognize her attraction to women, and the unease grows in her relationship with Saeed, Hamid presents the woman in the leather jacket as a thought-provoking peer to Nadia's personal development.

After months in London, Nadia and Saeed take a door to Marin, a city in California. It is clear by this point that Nadia's sexual interest in Saeed has faded. Nadia reflects on her sexuality:

It was not that her sensuality, her sense of the erotic, had died. She found herself aroused readily . . . And sometimes when Saeed was out or asleep she pleased herself, and when she pleased herself she thought increasingly of that girl, the girl from Mykonos, and the strength of her response no longer surprised her. (Hamid 200)

This is a turning point for Nadia. She has been attracted to the girl from Mykonos for some time, but this is the first time we learn that she is “no longer surprised” by the fact (much less “alarmed” as she was before). In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick explores the idea of what it means to come out. People do not come out as gay, she suggests, the first time that they experience attraction to the same gender—or even the first time that they have sex with someone of the same gender. People come out when they recognize themselves, and allow others to recognize them as gay people (Sedgwick 4). In this moment, Nadia does not come out to another character, but she takes an important step by accepting that her attraction to women is part of her identity.

The final door for Nadia is not literal or magical. She stays in California, but moves out of the shanty which she shares with Saeed. She goes to live in a room in the back of the food co-op where she works, and this room’s “possibility struck Nadia with a shock of recognition, as though a door was opening up, a door in this case shaped like a room” (Hamid 216). It represents the possibility of change, but also a return to familiarity, as the room “reminded [her] of her apartment in the city of her birth, which she had loved, reminded [her] of what it was like to live there alone . . . and this room came to feel to her like a home” (Hamid 217). The door of this room gives Nadia the space to live independently and confidently as herself. The co-op where the room lies is also where Nadia meets her partner, “the cook, who reminded her a bit of a cowboy, and who made love, when they made love, with a steady hand a sure eye and a mouth that did little but did it so very well” (Hamid 219). Nadia delights in the “thrill [of] being seen by her, and seeing her in turn” (Hamid 218). Beyond sex and companionship, this community and visibility is part of the power of living while out.

Why are the doors such a compelling symbol in Nadia’s dual narrative of migrating and coming out? In *Closet Space*, Brown argues that these experiences can, and often must, go hand-in-hand. When Brown analyzes a collection of interviews with gay men about their life experiences, he finds that one “recurrent theme in these narratives was that of having to move to another place in order to know oneself as gay. It wasn’t enough just to open the closet door; one had to leave its interior for a different location” (48). That fits Nadia well, as her identity develops each time she leaves from a door. She experiences her first attraction to a woman in Mykonos, realizes its significance in London, comes to accept it in the Marin shanty, and finds love and security in her room at the co-op. Brown writes

that “[t]o find a community through which they can be themselves, be ‘out,’ [LGBTQ+ people] must migrate” (48). The reasons for which Nadia must migrate are more imminent—the danger from the militants who have overtaken her country—and her migration is both multiple and on a global scale. To say that the experience of migration is universal and queer would overlook essential dimensions of race, nation, culture, and gender; certainly Nadia’s migration is different from those of the British and American men quoted in this section of Brown’s book. A thorough analysis of Hamid’s doors must consider multiple perspectives of intersectionality.

The love between the elderly man and the wrinkled man and Nadia’s identity as a bisexual woman, are tied closely with the power of the doors. Furthermore, Nadia’s experience as a migrant is linked to her experience coming out. The doors that connect the people of the world in *Exit West* are portals that offer new possibilities for refugees and migrants. By introducing this one element into a setting otherwise completely like our world, Hamid poses valuable questions about modern social justice and politics. The existing scholarship of the implications for race, religion, and nations is essential, but a complete understanding must also consider what the doors mean for sexuality and LGBTQ+ identity.

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